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A Biblical Focus On Prayer - Part 7
A Prayer of Thanksgiving

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From the fourth Thursday in November until January first of the next year, is what Americans call "The Holidays." Starting with Thanksgiving, through Christmas, and ending on New Year's Day, we celebrate with food and family. Each year Americans eat untold of tons of turkey, ham, dressing, black-eyed peas, green bean casserole, pumpkin pie, etc. We also spend millions of dollars shopping for gifts, usually beginning on "Black Friday," the day after Thanksgiving.

All that is fine, but for Christians, the holidays should have greater meaning than just eating, shopping, and getting presents. At Thanksgiving we should take the time to thank God for the sustenance and material blessings He provides. In the Christmas season we should be especially grateful for the greatest gift of all, the birth of our Savior, Jesus Christ. New Year's is a good time to look ahead for how we can better follow and serve Him.

In this seven-part series we have studied about prayer. We looked particularly at Jesus' Model Prayer (Matt. 6:9-13), His prayer for His disciples (John 17:11-23), and other key passages that epitomize the various dimensions of effective prayer (Psalm 103:11-13, 19-22; 96:1-9; James 4:6-10, 13-17; Isaiah 38:1-6, 15-17). To read Parts 1-6 go here:

<http://www.marketfaith.org/?s=prayer&id=29>.

In the previous installment we looked at King David's psalm of confession, contrition, and acceptance of God's forgiveness (Psalm 51:1-7, 10-12). In this this final part we will analyze another

of David's songs, Psalm 138. In this poem, the shepherd/warrior/king presents a powerful example of praying in thanksgiving to God. His dramatic composition is an elegant illustration for our own times of expressing appreciation to God. We will see that, because of the Lord's loving character, He does what is best for us according to His will. Therefore, let's lift our hearts in gratitude during "The Holidays" or any other time!

The traditional Christian and Jewish belief is that this psalm, along with Psalm 51 and many others, was written by none other than King David. As we have discussed in previous articles, many liberal scholars assert that most psalms were written much later. So, they say, David was probably not the actual author of any of the 72 psalms ascribed to him. Nonetheless, evidence is strong that David did, indeed, write them. Incidents and people in David's life are mentioned in some textual subscriptions, but are not reported in either 1 and 2 Samuel, or in 1 Chronicles. Those are the books where David's life history is recorded. For instance, the subscript to Psalm 7 mentions "Cush the Benjamite (or Benjaminite)" who is not mentioned anywhere else in Scripture. If David did not write that psalm then how would a later author know anything about that man? (Cf. also Psalm 60 - the battles against "Aram-naharaim and Aram-zobah"). The strongest authoritative evidence for Christians is that Jesus and the apostles in the New Testament all unquestionably ascribed David's psalms to him (Mark 12:35-37; Acts 2:24-36; 4:25-26; 13:35).

Psalm 138's Hebrew ascription simply reads "of David" (*ledavid*). Thus, we take it that he was its author.

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That being said, unlike Psalm 51, we do not know precisely the factors that motivated him to write this poem. It is clearly a song of individual thanksgiving and praise for God answering his prayers for some special act of salvation or deliverance from his enemies.

So in this last installment, we will learn three key elements of giving thanks to God. It serves as a fitting conclusion to this seven-part study because in all cases we should express our love and gratitude to God for His love and answers to our prayers.

First, we should always thank God for His love and truth.

Of David. 1 I will give you thanks with all my heart; I will sing your praise before the heavenly beings. 2 I will bow down toward your holy temple and give thanks to your name for your constant love and truth. You have exalted your name and your promise above everything else. Psalm 138:1-2 CSB

David opens his poem with a strong expression of his love and thanksgiving directly to the Lord. He says, "*I will give you thanks with all my heart*," meaning from the deepest levels of his emotions, and with total sincerity. The heart was regarded as the place where emotions were centered. We still use that saying metaphorically as when people fall in love. The phrase "*I will give you thanks*" (*o·wd·ka* - CSB; NASB) is also translated in some versions as "*I will praise you*" (KJV; NIV). Both ways of rendering the terms emphasize David's deep gratitude for all the Lord has done for him. Spontaneously he exalts God.

To underline how important this blessing is to him, David thanks God "*before the heavenly beings*" (*elohim*) (CSB). Most English ver-

sions translate that term as "*the gods*." Essentially David praises his One True God right in the faces of the many false pagan "gods" (NIV puts it in quotations) that are worshipped by the nations around him (eg.: Ex. 12:12 - "*all the gods of Egypt*"). It may also refer to created spiritual beings, like angels and demons (cf. Psalm 82).

The pagan nations surrounding Israel, in biblical times, worshipped numerous deities (polytheism). Their mythological gods and goddesses originated in certain places and regions. They often symbolized national power and political dynasties. It was thought the gods fought alongside the kings against their enemies and their gods. Some of the nations Israel engaged included Egypt with its gods *Aton* (the Sun), *Amen-re*, *Osiris*, etc. The Mesopotamians worshipped *Anu*, *Ishtar* (AKA: *Astarte*), *Ashur*, *Marduk*, and *Bal*. The Canaanites' deities included *Baal* and *Mot*. The Ammonites even made human sacrifices to *Molech*. Later, the Greeks and Romans honored *Zeus* (*Jupiter*), *Ares* (*Mars*), and dozens more.

In any case, the Bible, of course, only recognizes one Almighty God: the LORD (Yahweh). The Judeo-Christian worldview is that only one true God created the universe (monotheism). The indication of Scripture is that all other gods or goddesses do not exist. Any nation or individual who bows to them, or makes images of them, is in violation of the first two of the Ten Commandments: "*I am the Lord your God... Do not have other gods besides me. Do not make an idol for yourself.*" (Ex. 20:2-4). (See also Isa. 44:6-11).

Paul warns that those participating in pagan sacrifices actually are worshipping demons. "*What am I saying then? That food sacrificed to idols is anything, or that an idol is anything? No, but I do say that what they sacrifice, they sacrifice to demons and not to God. I do not*

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want you to be participants with demons!" (1 Cor. 10:19-20).

Christians should be alarmed by the growth of paganism in America. Millions of people now believe in and worship false and counterfeit deities. For example, in the city of Lilburn, Ga., a suburb of Atlanta, stands one of the largest pagan temples in North America. It is dedicated to thousands of gods which hundreds of people worship each week. Millions in this nation also worship in cults and religions that follow deceptive prophets, proclaim counterfeit gospels, and declare false Christs. These new faiths pose great challenges to Christians to reach them with the true Gospel of the True God and Christ.

David then vows to prostrate himself toward the Lord's holy temple. In David's case he meant the tabernacle, since the temple was not yet built. This is in contrast to those who bow down to useless idols in their temples. David clearly was not bowing down to the temple, but toward the temple. He saw it and the Holy Place inside as the symbolic dwelling place of the Lord in the midst of His people.

He further dedicates his praise to God's *"name."* His name represents God's character and actions. It could be translated as "reputation." It is like what Jesus said in His Model Prayer, *"Your name be honored as holy,"* meaning His person, character, and authority. His name should be uttered in prayer as holy and honored because of His perfection and goodness (see Part 2). And why this show of devotion and praise to His name? Because God's character is that of *"constant love"* (*hesed* - "loving kindness" - see Part 1) and *"truth"* (*'a-mit-te-ka* - also rendered "faithfulness" in some versions).

The fact that God's nature is, at its foundation, that of love and truth is another significant difference from

who He is and the distorted notions of the fallible pagan gods. Without love there can be no truth, and without truth there is no love. We know that love and truth were embodied in the person of Jesus Christ. *"Grace, mercy, and peace will be with us from God the Father and from Jesus Christ, the Son of the Father, in truth and love"* (1 John 3, etc.).

The next phrase is difficult to translate. The CSB says, *"You have exalted your name and your promise above everything else."* The NASB has it, *"For You have magnified Your word according to all Your name."* And the NIV renders it, *"for you have so exalted your solemn decree that it surpasses your fame."* Regardless of the exact translation the key phrase is *"your promise"* (*'im-ra-te-ka* - or *"Your word"*).

The point is that God kept His promises when David prayed. God's promises are His guarantee of salvation and blessings to His people. It is defined as the divine assurances delivered by God throughout history beginning with Adam and Eve. It continued with Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, and the nation of Israel. His promise included three basic principles: (1) He would be their God; (2) they would be His people; and (3) He will dwell in their midst. For David it had relevance well beyond himself in that God had promised his line would have a special part in God's eternal plan (the Messiah).

Second, we should always thank God that He provides all we need.

3 On the day I called, you answered me; you increased strength within me. 4 All the kings on earth will give you thanks, LORD, when they hear what you have promised. 5 They will sing of the LORD's ways, for the LORD's glory is great. 6 Though the LORD is exalted, he takes note of the humble; but he knows the haughty from a distance. Psalm 138:3-6 CSB

"Power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely!" That famous aphorism was originally stated in a letter sent from Lord John Dalberg-Acton to Anglican Archbishop Mandell Creighton in 1887. He then adds, "Great men are almost always bad men, even when they exercise influence and not authority: still more when you super-add the tendency or the certainty of corruption by authority." In this section of his poem David contrasts the grateful attitudes of those who follow God to the self-indulgent pride of those in great power, and the gods they worship.

He first gives further evidence of his motivation to praise the Lord. He says addressing the Lord directly, "*On the day I called, you answered me; you increased strength within me*" (vs. 3 - CSB) (*'oz be·nap·si tar·hi·be·ni wat·ta·'a·ne·ni qa·ra·ti be·yo·wm*). The verse's exact translation is also a bit vague. Literally it is, "*[with] strength in my soul strengthened me and You answered when I cried on the day.*" The NIV renders it, "*When I called, you answered me; you greatly emboldened me.*" The NASB has it, "*On the day I called, You answered me; You made me bold with strength in my soul.*" Whatever is the correct rendering, we can nonetheless discern its meaning. When David called out in his time of need, God answered him. As a result, he was inspired to feel strengthened to act boldly. This was another reason for David's thanksgiving. As Jesus instructed His disciples to pray for their needs (Matt. 11b), so can we can ask Him to provide for us. Then we will praise Him like David.

David then returns to his indictment against his enemies and their false gods. In this case he declares that all the nations, forsaking their counterfeit deities, will some day join him in his praise to the One True Lord (*Yahweh*). He says they will, in time, become aware of what the Lord has said and promised (see above).

The poet is confident that what the Lord says and does is unfailingly superior to the pagan gods of the nations. He proclaims with audacity, "*They will sing of the Lord's ways.*" As they come to hear and witness the Lord's presence and acts they will be convinced that His "*glory is great.*" The Lord, unlike the national deities, is the undisputed God of the whole world. Praise and thanksgiving to Him alone will extend far beyond the borders of Israel to the ends of the earth.

David's confident assertion was fulfilled and is still being completed in the evangelism and mission efforts of the Christian church. Jesus laid out the commission to take the knowledge of the True God to the world, "*Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe everything I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age*" (Matt. 28:19-20). Indeed, kings and rulers across the globe now pay homage to the King of Kings.

Of course, the task is not yet finished. Millions of human beings are still living in spiritual darkness and do not know about Jesus or the God of the Bible. Most still practice idolatry and live in superstitious fear. We must never forget that God's plan is for His people to spread His word and shine His light in humanity's gloom.

As Avery Willis (see Part 5) so aptly stated, "Missions originated in the heart of God. It is not something we decide to do for God, but God reveals His purpose to us so that we may have a creative part in His mission." Willis, citing the Apostle Paul's letter to the Ephesians, says there are three basic purposes of God's mission and ours: (1) to bring glory and praise to God (Eph. 1:6, 12, 14); (2) to share the Good News to the alienated (Eph. 6:3-9); and (3) to display the wisdom of God to evil powers (Eph. 3:10). We see these same principles extolled years earlier in David's psalm. God's plan has always been to cover the earth with knowledge of Him. [Willis, Avery. *The Biblical Basis of Missions*. (Nashville: Convention Press, 1984). p. 23-24]

The reason, David says, that he and His land enjoy the blessing of the Lord and that many kings and nations do not recognize the truth of God is stated in verse six. He says that despite God's powerful position, He nonetheless, "*takes note of the humble*" (CSB) (*we·sa·pal* - "*the lowly*" [as in most other translations]). As great as God is He is favorably inclined to bless and deliver "the lowly" who humble themselves and ask for His help. They understand, as did David, that their only real hope is in the Lord.

This is in stark contrast with those he calls the "*haughty*" (*we·ga·bo·ah*). These are those proud people who refuse to acknowledge the power and strength of the Lord or believe they do not need His assistance. In

many cases they have great political power or wealth. They believe their lofty positions will accommodate their needs, often at the expense of others. As the above quotation said, power tends to corrupt a person from within. David says God only knows these narcissists "*from a distance*" (see Part 4). In Part 3 we discussed the Bible's attitude toward pride. We said that not all pride is bad, as when we are proud of our children's achievements. However, it can express itself in conceit, arrogance, or self-righteousness, like "Pharisees" who think they deserve God's care. Actually, God rewards those who need Him, and stands back from those who think He needs them.

The application of this section should be evident to all Christians. Because of Christ, we now, three thousand years later, as Gentiles (though some of you reading this study may be Messianic Jews), can join David in His song of praise and thanksgiving to the One True Lord. We should humbly and sincerely give thanks to Him for our salvation and for all His blessings granted us. Perhaps the most basic truth of the Bible is that everything we have, everything good thing we do, and everything we are, is dependent on God and His beneficent grace.

Third, we should thank God that He keeps us and protects us.

7 If I walk into the thick of danger, you will preserve my life from the anger of my enemies. You will extend your hand; your right hand will save me. 8 The LORD will fulfill his purpose for me. LORD, your faithful love endures forever; do not abandon the work of your hands. Psalm 138:7-8 CSB

"In February 1955, the Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD), through the pages of the internally produced BEAT magazine, conducted a contest for a motto for the police academy. The winning entry was the motto, '*To Protect and to Serve*' submitted by Officer Joseph S. Dorobek. On November 4, 1963, the Los Angeles City Council passed the necessary ordinance and the credo has now been placed alongside the City Seal on the Department's patrol cars." [http://www.lapdonline.org/history_of_the_lapd/content_basic_view/1128]

Many law enforcement agencies around the country display a motto on the sides of their squad cars something like the one above from the LAPD. We all appreciate the dedication of the police for our safety, sometimes even at the risk or sacrifice of their own lives. David saw beyond the armed forces he amassed as king for his defense. He knew his survival ultimately depended on the Lord's protection. In this section we study his prayerful petition for God to take care of him in times of trouble.

Though David is King, nonetheless, he considers himself as one of "the lowly." He says, "*If I walk into the thick of danger*" or "*Though I walk in the midst of trouble*" (NIV). He understands that as a king, and as a believer in the True Lord, he is not immune from the trials and tribulations of life. In fact, they are probably magnified on both counts. Being King only multiplied exponentially the responsibilities and difficulties he faced. All followers of Jesus should likewise recognize that God does not promise their lives will be easy. Actually the life of a Christian, especially in our current secular and increasingly pagan cultural milieu, may be quite difficult. Unless there is a genuine spiritual revival in America, the troubles for believers in the future will only get worse.

That's why prayer has to be a priority in our lives. We must, like David, trust God when he says "*you will preserve my life*" (*te-hay-ye-ni*), or "*you will revive me*" (NASB) from the attacks of his enemies. He uses the figure of God extending out, "*Your hand*" (*ya-de-ka*). He says "*Your right hand will save me*" from his dangers.

The "hand," of course, is one of the most important and useful parts of human anatomy. In the Bible the word is used 1800 times! It is used literally 500 times and figuratively 1300 times. In most cases the figurative language is applied in relation to the almighty power and supreme authority of God. "*Riches and honor come from you, and you are the ruler of everything. Power and might are in your hand, and it is in your hand to make great and to give strength to all*" (1 Chronicles 29:12). The term can be used either in a positive sense or negatively. The positive idiom is for God to do good. The negative way it is for Him to hinder or destroy someone or something. This psalm seems to have both meanings. The Lord's hand will both rescue him and

destroy his enemies. This is reminiscent of Jesus saying to pray to be protected from "temptation" and "the evil one" (Matt. 6:13).

David closes the psalm with an affirmation that, "*The Lord will fulfill his purpose for me*" ("*vindicate me*" - NIV). The King's assurance is based on all his prior experience of God's care and his firm belief that He will finish what He has in mind for him. He ends with the confident statement that God's "*faithful love*" ("*loving kindness*" - *hesed*, see Part 1) is unchanging and never ending. David knows that come what may, the Lord's benevolence towards him is permanent. The last line is, "*do not abandon the work of Your hands.*" He is saying to the Lord, simply and with a grateful demeanor, "*Please don't stop what You are doing!*"

Christians, more than ever, must lift our hearts in prayer for our own safety, for that of our families, and for our nation. We can be thankful we have fine police departments and a strong military. Those human institutions cannot, however, substitute for the security only God can provide. If David felt compelled to ask the Lord's protection for himself and this people, how much more so do we. Our personal and national security is first and foremost dependent on our faithfulness to God and His Word.

In this seven-part study, we surveyed the subject of prayer from a biblical perspective. In the installments we analyzed scriptural elements for effective prayer. Most notable was the direct teaching of Jesus in His Model Prayer (Matt 6:9-13). We learned how understanding God affects how we pray (Palm 103:1-5, 11-13, 19-22). We saw a wonderful example of how prayer should honor God (Psalm 96:1-9). In his letter, James gave us valuable insight for approaching God humbly and submitting to His will (James 4:6-10, 13-17). In Isaiah (38:1-6, 15-17) we learned to pray for ourselves and to trust God. Jesus demonstrated how to intercede for others (John 17:11-23). David's prayer of confession challenged us to repent of our own sins knowing that God forgives us (Psalm 51:1-7, 10-12). And finally we read David's gratitude and trust in the One God who hears our prayers for protection.

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